

Equilateral by orphan_account

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Summary:

Karen Wheeler doesn't understand what she's seeing, but she's afraid for them.

Equilateral

Author's Note:

Because I hated that Karen was so left in the dark about most of things that happened.

Ever since the thing with Will Byers and Mike and the scary men with the black coats, she's determined to keep a closer eye on *all* her children. She knows that they kept things from her, all of them. And she knows that somehow, both Mike and Nancy lost some of their naiveté about the true workings of the world.

They watch TV on the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, like a pile of puppies. She doesn't know what to think about them. They seem to have no understanding of social standards and expected behavior.

If they were younger, their arrangement wouldn't give her pause. Mike and his friends have few personal boundaries, but puberty hasn't hit them yet, to make them aware of themselves. These three are well past that point, and also, if asked, Karen would have said that Jonathan Byers was a non-factor in her daughter's life.

As she watches, Nancy cards her fingers through Jonathan's hair. Karen shifts her gaze, expecting Steve to object, to emphasize his prior claim on her affections. But instead, he digs his fingers into Jonathan's neck, working the tense muscles there. The other boy arches into the contact like a cat, enjoyment clear on his face. Karen doesn't understand, because any other teenage boy would pull back and find some way to assert his masculinity, probably with loud proclamations about not being a fag.

Steve does none of that, smiling fondly at Jonathan instead.

Karen turns away, the spaghetti pot on the stove demanding her attention. She stirs the pasta, brain turning over the puzzle they present. She is reasonably certain that Nancy is having sex with Steve; Nancy had admitted as much when Barb disappeared. But

Karen is nearly as positive that her daughter is also sleeping with Jonathan. They have a certain intimate familiarity between them that's nearly impossible without a physical connection.

Nancy and Jonathan make sense to her. Steve does not. He should be losing his mind, as he clearly sees the same things that Karen does. If Nancy is cheating on Steve with Jonathan, she's making no attempt to hide it.

Placing the pasta in a casserole dish, Karen adds sauce and grates cheese over the whole thing before putting it in the oven.

With dinner safely tucked away, she returns to the living room. They have rearranged themselves.

Nancy is tucked against Steve's side, her face pressed against his shoulder, his arm tight around her back. But Jonathan is curled on his side, head pillowed on Steve's thigh. And Steve has draped his hand over Jonathan's neck, his fingers moving in minute circles, a gesture so possessive that Karen nearly gasps aloud.

She feels like she's watching something she shouldn't, like they couldn't have been more exposed than if they'd been naked. She wants to weep, she wants to shout at them to stop touching each other. She's terrified for the road her daughter has chosen.

But on the other hand, she can see the beauty in their symmetry, the way they've constructed themselves so that every piece is supported.

And she adds a third side to the puzzle – Jonathan and Steve are also lovers.

How? She doesn't understand them.

When they leave, the boys muttering polite goodbyes, while Nancy offers to walk them out, Karen stays planted in her chair by sheer force of will. Every part of her wants to follow, to see.

If she looked out the window, would she see her daughter trading kisses with the two boys? Would she see the boys kissing . . . each other?

She buys jumbo boxes of condoms at the grocery store, hoping the clerk won't say anything. When she gets home, she hides the box under the bed, knowing Ted will never look there. Karen wants to convey acceptance and concern, but now she has no idea how to proceed. Telling her children that she'll listen and won't judge them didn't get her anywhere before.

She makes a double recipe of her broccoli chicken rice bake and puts one casserole in a foil dish. A peace offering, a bribe, a plea – she's not sure what the casserole represents, but she hopes it leads to answers.

She plops Holly on Nancy's bed and tells her oldest daughter she'll be back in an hour or two. Karen ignores Nancy's protests.

Joyce is welcoming, if slightly puzzled. Her life isn't in any sort of a crisis as far as she knows, and Karen feels a brief stab of guilt that Joyce expects her kindness only when things have gone to hell. Their kids are best friends, for God's sake.

"Our kids are best friends," she says, hoping that's explanation enough. Although she's not referencing the set of kids that Joyce probably expects. She shoves the foil-covered casserole into Joyce's hands. Her entry fee. The condom box sits heavy in the bottom of her purse.

"True enough," Joyce says, leading the way into the dim house. "But that's never been us."

Karen sighs. She'd hoped to get by on polite fabrications of good behavior that would make Emily Post proud, but Joyce has never been the Junior League sort.

"I . . . think I need advice," she says.

"Coffee?" Joyce asks, gesturing to the tired table in the kitchen.

"Please."

Karen takes a seat, feeling slightly reassured by Joyce's social

niceties. She wraps her hands around the warm mug and lets the aroma steady her before taking a sip.

“I just can’t imagine what you might need from me,” Joyce begins.

“It concerns our children.”

“Will and Mike? What now?”

Because she’s looking for it, Karen sees Joyce’s fingertips turn white as she clenches the table. Joyce knows that truth, and Karen wonders if she could play those fears until she got some answers. She dismisses the thought, aware that she has far more prosaic worries than whatever happened to Will.

“Not them. The other ones.”

“What about them?”

Now Joyce has gone on defense, a lioness ready to defend her cub, and Karen wonders if she can safely navigate this conversation.

“Jonathan. And Nancy. They like each other.” Start with the obvious maybe.

“Yes. Do you have a problem with my boy?” Joyce growls.

“She’s still dating Steve.”

Joyce deflates. “I had hoped . . . he’s never. I mean, he’s never shown an interest in someone that would actually talk to him before. I hoped Nancy felt the same.”

Karen reaches out, carefully, not sure how the gesture will be interpreted, and pats Joyce’s hand. “She does.”

“I’m confused.”

“So am I.” Now comes the tricky part, the part that’s likely to get her slapped, or screamed out of the house at the least. “I think that Steve is okay with it. Because . . .”

“Because . . .” Joyce prompts.

“Because he and Jonathan like each other too.”

Joyce pulls back, gone cold as ice. “What are you trying to say about my boy?”

“Not what you think,” Karen says. She puts her hands together, entwining her fingers. “I think they are all three . . . together.”

“Jesus Christ.” Joyce gapes at her. “I can’t decide if that’s better or worse.”

“This is Hawkins,” Karen says grimly. “It’s worse.”

“Than being gay?”

“There’s rules for being gay. It’s not normal but it’s an understood sort of deviance. There’s ways to deal with it. This . . . Hawkins has no experience with this. It’s not like that swinging stuff our parents did. You know how people get about things they don’t understand.”

Joyce shudders, that look on her face again, and Karen wishes for the thousandth time that she knew the whole story about what happened to Will.

“Are you suggesting we try and stop them?”

Karen rolls her eyes. “I remember being a teenage girl perfectly well. And I’m sure you do too.”

“Yeah,” Joyce smiles. “One track mind.”

“There’s no stopping her. She’ll just find a way to get around whatever we try to do. I just want to protect them.”

She roots in her purse, dragging out the box of Trojans, and placing it on the middle of the table. “For starters.”

Joyce chokes a little, her eyes taking in the size of the box. “What are you going to do with that?”

"I don't have the nerve to give it to Nancy. But maybe you . . ."

"I'll just leave it on Jonathan's bed."

"They can't stay here."

"Don't you think it will all work itself out? How many people end up with the person they dated in high school?"

Karen really wishes she could believe that, but she's seen how they are with each other. She's seen how Steve keeps a close eye on both of them, how he puts himself between them and the rest of the world. She's also seen how Jonathan and Nancy orbit him, drifting away for time but always coming back to the circle of his arms. She doesn't think that level of caring indicates a high school crush that will easily dissipate. And they must know that what they're doing is far beyond the realm of normal. Their feelings must be deep enough to make it worth the risk.

"I don't know," Karen says. "I don't know what happened with Mike and his friends while Will was missing. And I don't know how Nancy was involved, but I know she was. Maybe when her friend Barb went missing too. Maybe she needs both those boys because her best friend ran away without telling her. Maybe when Barb comes back, Nancy will let them go."

This time Joyce is the one to reach out, her touch gentle on Karen's wrists. "Barb isn't coming back."

"But they said . . ."

"*They* lied. Barbara is dead."

"Nancy knows?"

Joyce nods her head. "Me and Hop got Will but we were too late for Barbara."

Shaking her head, Karen says, "I just don't understand how they went from barely knowing each other to . . . this."

"Nancy and Jonathan and Steve. They teamed up. They helped save

Will. And they saved each other along the way..”

Karen rages inside that her children went through something that she’s entirely ignorant of. She takes a few steady breaths.

“Okay. Whatever they did, I think they have a strong bond, and time isn’t going to break it. See for yourself, get them all in the same room, watch how they act.”

“No, I believe you,” Joyce says. She drums her fingers on the table. “Indianapolis isn’t far enough. Or, open-minded enough. Chicago, maybe. But Jonathan has always wanted to go to NYU.”

“NYU? New York City.” So far away. But a huge city, big enough to hide three teenagers in love with each other.

“Okay, New York. Let’s get them there.”

Joyce grins at her, and Karen is relieved. At least she has an ally now.

As she gets up to leave, Joyce says, “Ask your kids about the little girl who lived in your basement for a week.”

Karen boggles at her. “What?”

Joyce shrugs. “I can’t tell you everything, but it might be a start.”

Maybe it happens like this:

- The boys are wrestling, laughing, while she looks on, jabbing her tickling fingers on any bare skin she finds. But things freeze, one on top of the other, their position intimate, thighs intertwined, hands grasping now instead of shoving. “It’s all right,” she says, giving them permission, her fingers urging them together now.

Maybe it’s another for-real fight.

- They pummel each other, faces bloodied, hands split open from

the force of their blows, inchoate rage with no outlet. She screams at them to stop, frantically tugging at their arms. She finally gets between them, and the fists stop, and they both claim her. And then each other.

Or maybe it goes like this:

- She sits them down, calm and mature, determined to talk through this thing that's become unavoidable, and says, "I don't want to choose." And they say, "You don't have to." "I don't?" she asks. "No," they say. "We want you to have us both. And we want to have each other."

Maybe it occurs some other way. Or maybe it happens in a thousand ways all at once. But the triangle always has three equal sides.